Codes of Control: The Dubbing Ritual and the Romance*

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Chrétien de Troyes left his *Perceval, or The Story of the Grail* unfinished, and inspired no fewer than four other poets to produce "continuations." The First Continuation has practically nothing to say about Perceval and precious little to say about the grail: in its long version, instead, we find almost twenty thousand lines telling of a whole host of independent adventures of a variety of heroes. Among them there is the story of Caradoc, which bears all the signs of being a quite independent romance.

The *Livre de Caradoc,* a six thousand line romance, ca. 1210, tells the story of Caradoc, King Arthur's great-nephew. On the eve of Pentecost, Arthur makes him a knight, but the next day, a strange knight arrives to challenge the court: is there any man there brave enough to cut off his head with a sword? Caradoc accepts the challenge and cuts off his head, but the stranger just picks it up and promises to return in exactly a year to claim his part in the bargain. On the fateful day, he raises his sword ... and strikes Caradoc only with the flat of the sword, sparing his life. He reveals that he is the enchanter Eliavrés, and that he is Caradoc's real father: as we already know, Caradoc's mother spent the first three nights of her marriage with Eliavrés, while her enchanted husband lay with a greyhound bitch, a sow, and a mare.

Caradoc reveals his mother's actions to his legal father; because she is the niece of his overlord King Arthur, he cannot kill or banish her, but he locks her up in a tower. Outraged, she conspires with the enchanter to have a magical snake clamp itself around Caradoc's right arm and slowly drain the life out of him; she regards it as appropriate punishment for his treason against his true parents, and, surprisingly, so does Caradoc. He flees from his father's castle and lives the penitential life of a hermit, for nearly two years.

Caradoc has a friend named Cador, who has been devoted to him ever since he rescued Cador's sister Guinier from a knight who was abducting her. Cador finally

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manages to shame Caradoc's mother into revealing how remove the enchanted snake. Caradoc is placed, naked, into a tub of vinegar; Guinier is placed, naked, into a tub of milk three feet away. As a crowd of hermits sing a mass of the Holy Spirit around them, Guinier places her breasts over the edge of the tub, and begins to speak to the snake: (here you must imagine an aria by Puccini)

> Look at my breasts, how white and tender and beautiful they are. Look at my chest, whiter than the flower of a hawthorn. Consider how bitter that wine is, and how thin Caradoc is: there is nothing more to take from him. Do not let him mistreat you. You'd be wise to leave him. Come to me now, take hold of me. Come on now, serpent, I conjure you in the name of Almighty God, remove yourself from the arm of my sweetheart and hang on my breast. For I am white, plump and tender. With me, you will find something to keep you busy.

The serpent unwinds from Caradoc's arm and leaps the space between the two tubs; the ever-faithful Cador draws his sword and slices off its head, but too close to the breast, for he also cuts off his sister's nipple. Caradoc leaps from the bath, and is reclothed, not in his hermit's garb but in costly raiment suitable for a knight. In due course, after he marries Guinier and after his legal father dies and he has become king, Caradoc is given the magic boss of a shield which has the power to replace lost body parts with golden replicas, and heals Guinier's wound, telling her to keep it secret; this gift comes from Aalardin, the man who had earlier tried to abduct Guinier. In the final episode of the tale, Guinier, the woman with the secret golden nipple, is shown to be the only faithful wife in the whole of Arthur's court.

One's first thought on hearing a story like this might well be that the imagination which produced it ought to be referred, quickly, to a competent Freudian therapist, and certainly no full interpretation of it could be persuasive if it did not deal with the two fathers, the mother, the swords, the snake and the baths as focal points for uncathected fears and desires. But my topic here today is not *Caradoc.* As we learned yesterday, the social construction of the subject in the audience is not a postmodern phenomenon; *Caradoc* and host of roughly contemporary texts construct the post-adolescent male using a socially-determined set of signs, clustered around problematic areas of concern such as desire, power and independence: *Caradoc* makes a selection of elements from this set, and to which it ascribes its own particular secondary meanings to them, but it is in no way unique or aberrant.

The fighting class in France ca. 1200 was composed of men in four different ranks. There were the soldiers, a collection of poorly armed warriors fighting for plunder or for wages; the squires, young noblemen in service to individual knights; the knights, who possessed horses and full sets of offensive and defensive weapons; and there were the lords, who possessed castles and lands of their own and commanded the others to fight. There were more soldiers than squires, more squires than knights, and certainly

more knights than lords. Soldiers were highly unlikely to become squires, but squires served in hopes of becoming knights and knights served in hopes of becoming lords.

Each of the transitions was based on economics. The squire could only become a knight if someone were willing to make an investment in him, for the horse and the full armour represented a considerable capital outlay; this would happen only if there were some promise of a return on the investment, in the form of useful service to the lord who spends the money. The knight could become a lord only if he were able to acquire a gift of property, which could come from a great lord or from the estate of a father or from marriage to an available heiress; most knights in service to a lord were not first sons, and so the first and third of these options seemed most possible.

The transitions between these levels were mystified by associating them with elaborate texts which asserted that the young men in question were being rewarded for personal and spiritual qualities rather being paid in advance for future services. Squires were made knights through the dubbing ritual which, on the surface at least, implied that they were being transformed into a different sort of being, being adopted into a new "order." Knights – the fictional knights of the adventure romances, that is – became established, married lords of castles after a series of adventurous experiences in which they were purified of errors and excesses and had demonstrated that they were worthy of their new status. In the details of these two "texts," the ceremonial and the literary, are encoded sets of concrete symbols which may be read in such a way as to shed light on the nature of these three social ranks.

The candidate for knighthood is placed in a bath, then in a bed; he keeps a night-long vigil; he is dressed in white linen, black hose, and a red robe; at a public gathering, he is granted a helmet, a shield, a sword and gold spurs; then he receives the accolade. Then, after an "Arise, Sir Thomas," or "Sir Richard," or "Sir Harold," he is kissed by the officiant, and he is a knight.

Two different methods have been used in the attempt to understand the meaning of this ceremony. Recent scholarship, surveying all the surviving historical evidence from the period before 1200, has found the dubbing ceremony to be an outgrowth of rituals of civil empowerment, combined with the simple physical act of providing the young man with the armour and weapons he needed for fighting. Evidence is lacking, in this early period, for many of the details of the later ceremony, most notably for the accolade. A different sort of explanation is found in texts contemporaneous with the development of the ceremony. In the late twelfth century, new liturgical formulas show an increasing tendency to define this empowerment in religious terms: ecclesiastical blessings for the new knight's sword stress the belief that his power is to be used for ends in accordance with the demands of faith. This process was amplified in the thirteenth century: a number of full decodings of the ceremony survive, largely from clerical or royal sources, which assert that the function of each element in the ceremony is to remind the candidate of a religious truth. The bath is to remind him of baptism and freedom from

sin; the bed is to remind him of paradise, to which he must aspire; white linens are for cleanliness of the flesh, black hose for death and the earth where he will lie, a red robe for his blood, which he must be willing to spend in God's defence, the white belt for chastity; the gold spurs are to remind him to be as prompt in his response to God as a horse is to its rider; the sword, with its two edges, stands for justice and loyalty.

I see these two different explanations as evidence of a double movement in thirteenth-century culture. On the one hand, there is a concerted attempt to suggest that true civil power is being extended to a larger group of people, to many knights instead of just to a few nobles; on the other, there are attempts to place limits on the exercise of that power, limits which suggest that someone saw a threat in the knights' belief that they had become different from ordinary people. The clerical exegesis of the ceremony is intended to stress that it is *not* a sacrament, that is, that it does not effect a true transformation simply by being performed; its function is nothing more than significant, and it is declared to be significant of a world of values which limit the exercise of power and diminish the individual autonomy of the knight.

This is only one of a number of areas in which clerical culture was a step behind secular culture and in which modern scholarship has missed the point by paying more attention to overt statements in clerical texts than to the subtler presentations in secular imaginative literature. By the time the clerical ceremony decoders began their work, authors of adventure romances had already been making the case for limitation of knights' independence even as they produced the works which are now seen as most supportive of the ideals of individual knighthood.

Each of the physical elements in the ceremony is capable of being made a plot-element in a narrative; the heroes of romances and Breton *lais* have armour put on their bodies, or taken off; they stay awake all night; they enter and leave "baths" and beds; they discover their true names, or they lose and regain their names; and they receive various sorts of accolades. When these elements occur in the poems, they are not presented as simple naturalistic details, but amplified and surrounded with eye- and ear-catching descriptions and transformed into important stages in the progressive life-history of the knight. The full collection of such literary devices is evidence of an assertion that "true knighthood" is achieved only through an experiential process, not through a ceremony, and that it is accomplished through the combination of testing and empowerment, but only after a temporary but almost total disempowerment. Through their selection and combination of elements from this full set and through their suggestions of causal relations between the hero's responses to them and his ultimate success, individual authors were able to make particularized statements about a whole range of social problems in a manner which was tailored to the perceived economic and psychological needs of both the young men in their audience and the established lords who relied on their services.

A considerable number of short Breton *lais* or longer romances make use of narrative analogues to elements of the ceremony as signs of testing, temptations or validation of success. The bed is the narrative locus either of a threat to life or of a temptation to abandon the struggles of knighthood. Bodies of water mark boundaries between incomplete and perfect knighthood. Scenes of putting on armour or having one's armour removed highlight various types of knighthood, often with a subsidiary interest in the question of who assists in the arming process. Acquiring a name, losing an old name and acquiring a new name, and the loss and re-acquisition of an honorific title occur at transition points in the experiences of the heroes and suggest that those transitions are correlated with degrees of possession of knighthood. These elements, alone or in combinations, govern the structure of a host of twelfth- and thirteenth-century texts.

The *Lai de Doon* tells of a rich heiress who refused to marry any man, no matter how worthy. Under pressure from her vassals, she finally consents to take a husband, agreeing to marry any man who can ride from Southampton to Edinburgh in a single day. Many men try, and a few succeed, but when they complete their journey they are sent to sleep in a soft bed, and, much to her pleasure, they die. The poem's hero, however, stays awake in the maiden's chamber until the dawn, and he does not die. The maiden's "perilous bed" is merely a soft and comfortable place to sleep, dangerous only to those who yield to physical exhaustion, and Doon avoids its dangers simply by staying awake all night, by performing the real-life equivalent of the vigil of the dubbing ceremony. Once the night has passed, he is even able to get into the bed and sleep, and nothing happens. The message of this preliminary episode, that the pleasures of the bed must be won and may be safely enjoyed only after a trying period of watchfulness, is repeated, on a larger scale, in the remainder of the poem. Doon marries and impregnates the woman and leaves within four days; only after fifteen more years of military service does he return to her and live out his retirement in comfort.

In Chrétien de Troyes' *Le Chevalier de la Charrette,* Lancelot is attacked by a burning lance while he is lying in a bed, and Gauvain in *Le Chevalier à l'Épée,* after having his spurs and then his clothing removed, is similarly struck twice by a magic sword while lying in bed. Other heroes such as Perceval, Le Bel Inconnu, Fergus and Gawain (in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight)* are visited by young women while they are lying in bed; their responses to these temptations are crucial to their success in later challenges.

Like the "bed," the "bath" appears in a number of romances, usually transformed into a passage through or over a dangerous river: knights like Lancelot in *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* or Kay and Gauvain in *La Mule sans frein* must cross and narrow bridge over a hellish river to achieve their goals. Jaufre, who has been successful in all his military endeavours but is becoming ruled by his fiancée, must be dragged through a magic fountain and shamed into defending an oppressed lady. The *Lai of Tyolet* presents the "bath" motif in combination with the "grant-of-arms" motif. The hero is a

young man raised by his mother in the forest in total ignorance of knighthood. One day he sees a magical and ghostly man on the other side of a river wearing "clothing" of a type he has never seen before. He engages him in conversation, and there follows a detailed catechism in which the names of every piece of knightly equipment are transmitted to him across the water. Only then does he return home and bully his mother into giving him real armour, the weapons which used to belong to his father. The particular quest later imposed on him requires him to ride through a deep swift-running river; all the other knights of the court are afraid to undertake the crossing, but Tyolet passes the water-test and ultimately wins the hand of the princess.

Chrétien de Troyes' first romance, *Erec and Enide* (ca 1170) makes productive use of the "bed" motif and the "grant of arms" motif. The first time the hero has his armour put on him, the action is performed by the young woman who has just been promised to him in marriage: "She laces on his iron greaves and binds them with a deer-hide thong. She dresses him in a well-meshed hauberk and laces on the ventail. On his head she places the burnished helmet, arming him splendidly from top to toe. At his side she fastens his sword, then orders his horse to be fetched, and that is done." Despite the fact that this is done not as part of a ceremony but as a simple preparation for battle, the identity of the "granter of arms" seems to have its effect on the receiver. He becomes "her" knight, so much so that he later gives up all desire to participate in knightly actions, wanting nothing more than to spend all his time with her. He becomes an object of reproach to all his friends and followers. Though Enide is the cause of Erec's recreance, she is an unwilling cause: as they lie in bed together, she allows herself to let a brief, sighing lament for him to escape her lips, and he urges her to tell him what is wrong. When she reveals his loss of reputation, he is inspired to set out on a journey to prove his worth: this time, however, we are treated to a lengthy description of how he took direct control over his own arming, playing, as is appropriate for a future king, the roles of both officiant and candidate. "First he had laced on a pair of greaves ... then he donned a hauberk ... after that he takes and girds on the sword."

A similar concern with the identity of the officiant may be found in the later *Prose Lancelot,* where Lancelot manages to have himself dubbed by Arthur but to receive his sword from Guenevere, and in *Beaudous,* where the hero is dubbed by his mother, who gives him armour and a new name; but the sword she gives him must be replaced by another, one which only he can draw from its scabbard, before he can begin to have knightly adventures.

The ceremonial name change is prefigured in a number of romances in which the hero changes, learns, or conceals his name in the course of the action. Chrétien's Lancelot is both Lancelot and The Knight of the Cart. The heroes of *Perceval, Le Bel Inconnu,* the *Prose Lancelot* and Ulrich von Zatzikhoven's *Lanzelet* learn their own names, by intuition or revelation, only after they have successfully completed the early stages of their careers. After he is armed, Tyolet calls himself "Chevalier-Beste," as part

of the author's way of dealing with the two possible modes of knightly combat. Tristan is temporarily Tantris, and Yvain's recuperation requires that he be re-named The Knight with the Lion. In this context, Gawain's frequently repeated refusal to change or conceal his name becomes a complex issue for the critic. In *La Vengeance de Raguidel* he allows himself to be called Kay in order to escape the threat of decapitation. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* Lady Bercilak treats the name "Gawain" as synonymous with "ladies' man" at a most inopportune moment, and in *Le Chevalier à l'Épée,* his customary honorific title "messire" vanishes from the text during the period of his disempowerment.

Each of these scenes suggests that romance authors were concerned with elucidating the possible errors and dangers which might arise from the knight's view of himself, from sexual temptation, or from physical strife, and that they built their stories around resonant physical objects from the dubbing ritual in order to assert the educative, testing and transformational possibilities of such experiences.

But perhaps the most interesting aspect of this question is the literary transformation of the accolade. Even as a component of the ritual, this action is anomalous. It is absent from the early historical evidence, and when it is first mentioned in the decodings it is treated somewhat gingerly. It is passed over in the attempts to give symbolic meaning to the ritual, or, at best, is declared to be intended just to remind the new knight of the occasion and of the officiant. In *Garin le Loherain,* when a peasant named Rigaut is dubbed, he treats the elements of the ceremony in purely material terms, accepting the bath because he needs it, refusing some of the gifts of clothing as unnecessary and cutting the long mantle so it won't get in his way. When he receives the accolade, he responds as if to any other sword-blow, with an attempt at retaliation. In the *Ordene de Chevalerie,* Hue de Tabarie is willing to take Saladin through the bath which signifies baptism and the bed which signifies paradise, but he is unwilling to give him the accolade, not because Saladin is a Saracen or because Hue is unwilling to effect the whole ceremony, but because it would be improper for a prisoner to strike his captor.

In more recent times, since it has become possible to induct, for example, structural anthropologists into knighthood, Sir Edmund Leach has pointed out that "although they tell you the details before the ceremony, they do not tell you that the flat of the sword vis-à-vis the shoulder is the edge of the sword vis-à-vis the neck." At what is probably the most crucial moment in the ritual, the young man is given a powerful, experiential reminder of the absolute power the officiant has over his life: "I could cut your head off," says Queen Elizabeth, "but I shan't."

The culmination of the ceremony of empowerment, then, is a moment in which the candidate accepts complete submission to the officiant and is reminded that his independence is fully dependent on the will of another.

Decapitation and neck wounds are as prevalent in medieval romances as in Sea Dayak literature, from the Irish *Fled Bricrend,* perhaps as early as the eighth century, to

the late fourteenth-century English *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.* Some such works, including, for example, *Caradoc,* have been gathered together under the heading "The Beheading Game," and studied, largely by English scholars, as possible sources for *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* but there has been little concern with connecting them with one another and indeed little concern for the meaning of the material. Other texts, in which the decapitation and neck wounds are not part of an organized rule-governed "game," have been pointlessly excluded from consideration.

The most interesting examples are those which, like *Caradoc,* bring questions of gender, sexuality and intergenerational strife and power transfer into the mix, often more closely juxtaposed with the neck wound than in *Caradoc.* In Ulrich von Zatzikhoven's *Lanzelet* (a French poem which happens to survive only in a German version) the young and still unnamed Lancelot spends the night in the house of a dangerous host. The host's daughter tries to seduce Lancelot's companions, but they reject her out of fear of her father, so she turns to Lancelot as a last resort, and he accepts her advances, as much out of a desire to surpass his companions as out of desire for her. When the father learns of this in the morning, he challenges Lancelot to a knife-fight. They face each other across the room, and the father throws first, wounding Lancelot's right shoulder. Having submitted to the power of the knife, Lancelot now possesses the power of the knife, and – for there are no rules in knife-fights – rushes across the room and stabs his host in the heart. As a sign that this is not quite the proper arrangement of the necessary elements for true knighthood, the poet makes his hero undergo a number of other adventures with a number of other women before he is allowed to settle down.

Neck wounds and the power they convey are also linked with fathers and daughters in *Le Chevalier à l'Épée.* Gauvain sets out one day in search of amusement and gets lost in a forest. A strange knight invites him to his castle, but on the way Gauvain is warned by some shepherds that no visitor has ever returned from that castle. After he arrives, the knight's daughter tells Gauvain that anyone who contradicts her father is killed on the spot: from then on, Gauvain's speech is all "Yes sir" and "No sir." Gauvain is soon sent, naked, to bed with the daughter, alone in the father's room. Both in his nakedness and in his loss of free speech, Gauvain is being feminized, for the daughter is also afraid to contradict her father and in romances it is only women who are subjects of the gaze of the opposite sex. Once he is in the bed, Gauvain is at a loss what to do, fearing that any course of action will lead to death. He also loses his honorific title: throughout this portion of the text, he is referred to as "Gauvain" *tout court,* not "messire Gauvain." As he is about to have sex with the girl, she warns him that he is not the first man to be sent to bed with her, and anyone who has gone too far has been killed, not by her father, at least not directly, but by a sword which leaps out of its scabbard on the wall and kills them. Gauvain tries anyway, but is interrupted by the sword; it strikes his side, flies back to its scabbard, and leaves him deprived of all desire. He tries again, this time because he is worried about what his friends at court will say when they learn about it if he does

nothing; the sword flies out of its scabbard again, heads straight for his neck – but turns aside, and only nicks his shoulder. Having lost his clothing and his name, having passed the test of the bed, having been dubbed by the paternal sword, Gauvain can again become a knight the best knight in all the world, according to the text. When the father comes in the morning and sees the blood on the sheets, Gauvain – Messire Gauvain, that is, for the night's events have made a man out of him again – stands up to the father and is given the girl and, if he wants it, the castle as his reward. In bed the next night, "it wasn't a sword that was drawn." The romance closes with Gauvain exercising his new power of the sword by stabbing his wife's next boyfriend while he lies on the ground and by abandoning her in the wilderness after asserting that he knows better than she does what the meaning of her behavior was.

An early scene in *La Vengeance de Raguidel* shows the power over the neck controlled directly by a woman, and linked again with the loss of name. Gauvain arrives by chance in a castle and is warned by a handmaid that its lady wants to kill him. She fell in love with him, without ever having seen his face, but he has not responded to her letters, so her love has turned to a desire to kill him and be buried with him so they will never be separated. Gauvain will not lie about his name, but he allows the girl to call him "Kay" – the least worthy of Arthur's warriors--so he will be safe in the castle. The lady ushers him into a private room and points to a window opening up on an enclosed garden, with all the scents of paradise. "Put your head through there," she says, and then draws his attention to the guillotine in the top of the frame. But since he is temporarily not-Gauvain, he is given only an explanation and not a demonstration of the device, and can carry on with his adventures. These include killing a man who will only allow his daughter to marry the man who kills him.

In *Meraugis de Portlesguez,* the hero arrives on an island to discover that it is under the control of a group of women, and defended by a champion who must fight every intruder to the death. As he fights the champion, he discovers that it is his friend Gauvain, who would like nothing more than to escape from this service to the lady of the island. So they cook up a scheme: Meraugis falls down, Gauvain strikes at his head, and then rips off his helmet and throws it into the sea. The ladies, watching from up at the palace, think Meraugis has been decapitated. During the night, Meraugis disguises himself as a ghost, terrifies the women, and manages to lock them up so that he and Gauvain can escape. But the boatman will only come to the island if the lady summons him, and so they are trapped. Another scheme: Meraugis puts on women's clothing and waves and calls to the boatmen on the opposite shore. As he/she and Gauvain are getting into the boat, one of the men notices the extra weight and says "You are not our Lady!" Meraugis reaches under his dress, pulls out his sword, and says "This is your lady!"

The late fourteenth-century English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* represents the latest productive use of this set of elements, one which leads us away

from the original personal and social concerns into the more rarefied air of spiritual matters. The "loss of name" motif is more clearly associated with a concept of individual personality; there are three "clothing" scenes, but in two of them the pieces of clothing are given complex but determinate meanings and in the third clothing, like the bath, is reduced to a simple creature-comfort for a cold and exhausted Gawain; the nick in the neck has less causal connection to the temptations of the bed. The clerical ascription of signification process is taken even further in the "beheading game" aspects of the poem. When the Green Knight refuses to cut off Gawain's head, it is clearly an act of mercy, the mercy that replaces Old Testament eye for an eye justice; the nick in the neck is explicitly declared to be a sign of Gawain's penance for violation of the covenant he made earlier with the Green Knight, penance, in effect for his attempts to preserve his own life at the cost of breaking his word.

To sum up: scattered throughout the corpus of adventure romances and Breton *lais* of the late twelfth and early thirteenth century, we find evidence of a small, loosely organized and perhaps at best loosely organizable set of items, in groups of two or three or four, which are capable of being both simple elements in particular plot lines and of hinting at an alternate common socially-defined sequence of stages of maturation of the adolescent male. Each of these items is remarkably plastic, both in morphology and semantic field. The accolade may take the form of threatened decapitation or a sword blow to the hero's shoulder or be displaced, becoming a lion-bite on his horse's shoulder, or the removal of his fiancée's nipple, or, as in Chrétien's *Lancelot,* it can be doubled and even tripled into a wound in the side followed by a wound in the neck followed by a wound in the hand. Even secondary elements can take several forms, as the snake in *Caradoc* finds a parallel in a dwarf grinding pepper in a mortar in the *Lai de Desiré.* The bath may be a bath, or two baths, or a passage through a dangerous river. The clothing motif may be represented by arming or disarming, by nakedness or transvestitism. Thank God for Lévi-Strauss, or even I wouldn't believe that there is a system behind this diversity. The meaning-in-context of these items depends less on a "syntax" among them than on their incorporation into the diegesis. The identity of the granter of arms or of the accolade has an effect on whether the action "takes" or needs to be repeated, and whether the source of the knight's power is to be seen in women, in his father, in his lord or in his comrades, or even in himself. Depending on the context, the tempting bed may be sexual or a place to rest before the job is complete; it seems not to matter whether he avoids the temptation through moral scruples or through fear, and perhaps even whether he avoids it or succumbs to it. Such a set of such elements is perhaps too free from arbitrary rules to be called a "language"; but it is at least a sort of organizational pattern governing one aspect of the social self-consciousness of the period.

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